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He started a career in the old model, and when that stopped being profitable, he came up with a new version. He co-founded the Corrections Corporation of America (now CoreCivic) and figured out a way to capitalize on the over-population of our prison system.

E.G.: How do you see his background and prior attitude toward inmates playing out in CCA prisons today?

S.B.: I think it's a reflection of a mentality where inmates are intended to get a handful of people rich. This has been the mentality of prison systems, especially in the South, for most of American history.

The model of CoreCivic, of the GEO Group, is still based on this idea. If these companies are not making profit, they'll cease to exist.

One thing that was interesting in going through the history of these former versions of private prisons that we had in the 19th century was that the debates that existed around companies and prisons were very similar to what they are today. You would find op-eds where people were arguing that the profit motive and rehabilitation are at odds with each other.

As soon as a prison is intended to make money, then whoever is running the prison is going to cut corners wherever they can, whether that's on health care, food, security. It's built into that model that the well-being of prisoners is going to be a lesser priority, and I think that's the same today.

E.G.: What you witnessed in the span of four months, I think, would be shocking to even some of the harshest critics of private prisons. What did you personally find most surprising or disturbing during your time working there?

S.B.: I knew that there were issues with these prisons, but I was just not prepared for how chaotic and almost amateur the place would be. There's always a sense of chaos there, and a sense that the company was not in control, and that it didn't need to be. This has worked since the '80s, and states are saving some amount of money and they just kind of let things go. The prisoners were very violent, I saw people stab each other.

One thing I was surprised by was I didn't expect to find that the guards themselves were also being exploited by the system. I saw guards and inmates bond at times over their shared disdain for the company. The guards made \$9 an hour when I started there. They were poor people from the area, just like a lot of the prisoners were, some of them even knew some of the prisoners from their childhood. You would hear guards say, "I could have ended up on the other side."

The guards go home at night, but they, in many ways, also felt trapped there. They didn't have other options and they were working in the prison not because they wanted to, but because they just didn't have anywhere else to turn, so they would take this very dangerous, very stressful job, for very low pay.

E.G.: Do you think prisoners at CoreCivic facilities are treated better or worse than you yourself were treated when you were held prisoner in Iran?



A labor sympathy parade in New York City, 1916.

S.B.: It's so hard to compare these two systems. The prison I was in, in Iran, was a political prison, so it was a different thing. I was in prison with activists, members of Al Qaeda, people were tortured, we had to wear blindfolds when we left our cells, it was a very highly controlled environment.

Winn was, in some ways, the opposite. Where Evin in Iran was highly controlled, Winn was out of control. It was running rampant. Every day, we didn't know what was coming.

Prisoners would blow up because they weren't getting recreation time because there wasn't enough staff to watch over them, or their classes were cancelled because there was no one to teach them that day. The prison would occasionally go into lockdown because there weren't enough people to run the place.

And as much, the violence between prisoners was way higher.

E.G.: I want to talk about your own transformation in just four months. At one point you mention the famous Stanford prison experiment, where students playing guards did horrible things to students playing prisoners. This experiment really shocked people and was cut short, but after reading your book, I'm left with the impression that it was less of an experiment and more of a representation of what is actually happening in America's prisons every day. What do you think?

S.B.: I will say that I related a lot to that study. I won't say that every guard has the same experience that I did, but I was really surprised at how much I changed in that position, and how quickly. It really showed me how much your situation determines how you behave, how you think and how you react to what's around you.

It is very difficult to work in a prison, especially one that is run like this, where I had one other guard working a floor with

me in a unit of 350 inmates. So it was impossible for us to do what we were supposed to do there.

There was this kind of disconnect between what I was thinking and how I was acting, because I understood that the prison was a terrible place, and the conditions were horrible for prisoners, and if I was in their position I would be very angry. But at

the same time, I'm a human being who is interacting every day with them and wearing a uniform, and I am the one who is locking them in, and there is going to be tension between us. When I have a problem, or some prisoner has a problem with me and is threatening me, then I have this personal reaction to that person and there inevitably ends up being battles between us, for power and control and authority.

I found myself becoming very authoritarian, and at times, almost obsessed with the power dynamics that were happening between me and other prisoners, and my need to maintain control. It got to the point where I didn't like the person I was in the prison. I would feel like I was a different person inside than I was when I went home.

E.G.: It seemed like some of the guards entered the prison with a kind of cavalier attitude. Did you notice the same sort of transformation that you went through happening with any of the other cadets that you started with?

S.B.: I did, yeah. Many of the cadets – at least half – quit very quickly, and that was common. But there was one, he started after me, he was very nice, trying to be an easy going guard, just trying to treat prisoners as humans, which a lot of guards did when they started. He became really hardened very quickly, and that was common.

The other thing that was common is a lot

of guards, when that started happening, they just quit. They realized it wasn't worth it, for them.

And I think guards often went in one of two directions. There is a pressure from both the side of inmates and the side of prison administration to basically join their team. You would assume that a guard would be on the side of the administration, but that's not necessarily the case.

Either they would decide they wanted to be liked by the prisoners, and treat them humanely. Sometimes they would bring things in for prisoners, drugs, cellphones or they would quit because they couldn't deal with treating people in the way that you kind of have to if you do that job. Or, they go to the side of the administration and they kind of turn off that part of themselves that might feel guilty about punishing somebody or forcing somebody to do something that they don't want to do. Then they just kind of become numb to the human side of it and just do the job.

E.G.: I was hoping you might be able to put what you learned about CoreCivic in the context of the ramped-up immigration efforts taking place in this country right now. Do you know if these detention centers are run any differently than the prison you visited?

S.B.: I've never been in any of the immigrant detention centers. Over half of them are run by private companies. The vast majority of the largest detention centers are privatized.

I did meet some guards who were filling in at Winn who worked in (immigrant) detention centers, and they would complain about not being able to use force on the detainees. There are some different regulations because the detainees are not convicted of crimes, necessarily.

They would complain about how it was harder to use pepper spray on them, and stuff like that. But they're essentially being imprisoned, they can't leave. There's been hunger strikes, there's been riots in these detention centers over the same issues that have come up in the private prisons: poor health care, poor security, inadequate food. It seems that a lot of the same issues apply, which would make sense because it's essentially the same model that the companies are applying. They are still trying to service their bottom line. They're trying to cut the same corners that they do in a prison.

E.G.: Is there anything we didn't talk about that you'd really like to drive home about private prisons operating in America?

S.B.: Something that I really learned in writing this book, after the initial article in Mother Jones, and just researching history, was that I think we should understand, is that while today private prisons represent a relatively small part of the overall prison population, the vast majority of the history of prisons in America has been driven by profit. I think it's important for us to dig into this history and understand how we got to where we're at today, and much of that explanation lies in the fact that people have been trying to make money from people in this country who are not free, whether they were enslaved or incarcerated people.

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